

The Theology of Cinema: Congregation

In giving themselves over to a larger cause, the individuals forge themselves together as a congregation.

[Scott Myers](#)



As many of you may know, I have a background in the academic study of theology, a B.A. in religious studies from the University of Virginia and a Masters of Divinity degree from Yale. So it is only natural I bring that perspective to how I view and understand movies and screenwriting.

Let me be clear, when I say *theological*, I mean it — in this context — in a secular way. How does that make sense?

The word "theology" is a combination of two Greek words: "theos" which means God and "logos" which means word. So theology is *words about God*. What if for this series we think of God as a metaphor for an explanation for the big questions of life? Thus, theology as *words about the meaning of life*. Broadly speaking that is one dynamic movies hit on consistently, characters forced to confront their values, behaviors, and world views related to who they are and how they should act.

In this respect, movies and theology wade in very much the same thematic waters. As Andrew Stanton noted about *Lawrence of Arabia* in this [TED Talk](#), how the central theme of that story is the question asked of the Protagonist "who are you," that issue exists at the core of perhaps every movie, an existential exploration of a character or characters' self-identity. So, too, with theology.

Also, movies tend to be about characters at critical junctures in their lives, facing a journey from the Old World into a New World where through a series of challenges and lessons they undergo a significant metamorphosis. Sounds an awful lot like a conversion experience to me.

Thus, it is only natural there will be a lot of crossover of theological themes in movies. But while a theological theme in a movie *may* have a religious or spiritual connotation, I am more interested in exploring such themes metaphorically to find the widest value possible for screenwriters at large.

By working with this non-religious take on the concept, we can avail ourselves of numerous powerful theological themes in screenwriting regardless of whether our stories are secular or non-secular.

Today: Congregation.

Of course, the word *congregate* has a purely secular definition: to collect into a group or group; to assemble. But the noun form — congregation — conjures up religious connotations. An assembly of persons for collective worship. An organized body of believers. A religious community united in purpose.

The Latin root — *congregare* — literally means “to flock together”. Thus as screenwriters, we may create a metaphorical meaning of congregation for our stories in this way:

Characters who flock together united in purpose.

In *The Hero's Journey*, it is common for the Hero to accumulate allies along the way. Consider *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*. Luke Skywalker intersects with R2-D2 and C-3PO. Their actions in turn cause Luke to intersect with Obi-Wan Kenobi. Events then lead the group to Han Solo and Chewbacca. Finally, the entire clan meets up with Princess Leia to rescue her from the Death Star.



There you are: A congregation.

How about *Seven Samurai*: "A poor village under attack by bandits recruits seven unemployed samurai to help them defend themselves."



Of course, we have to include *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings*: "A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron."



A congregation of characters doesn't have to be a period piece, science fiction, or fantasy. How about a caper movie like *Ocean's Eleven*: "Danny Ocean and his eleven accomplices plan to rob three Las Vegas casinos simultaneously."



Or a comedy like *Bridesmaids*: "Competition between the maid of honor and a bridesmaid, over who is the bride's best friend, threatens to upend the life of an out-of-work pastry chef."



And, uh, this little indie drama: "The Avengers and their allies must be willing to sacrifice all in an attempt to defeat the powerful Thanos before his blitz of devastation and ruin puts an end to the universe."



Generally, there is a transformation arc among the group, starting out in a state of Disunity, but over time bound together, united by their shared purpose.

That unity of purpose is based on some central belief: Whether it's to destroy the Death Star or pull off a con, save Middle Earth or make sure a friend gets married, it represents an act that is bigger than each individual. In giving themselves over to a larger cause, the individuals forge themselves together as a congregation.